

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/explore/howard/news/community/ph-ho-cf-elkridge-csx-meeting-20111117,0,5818661.story>

Elkridge residents eye CSX intermodal updates with skepticism

Public meeting on proposed railroad facility draws hundreds

Howard County Times

By Kevin Rector, krector@tribune.com 11:11 PM EST, November 17, 2011

At the latest public meeting in Elkridge on the intermodal railroad facility being proposed by the CSX Corp. and the Maryland Department of Transportation, held at Elkridge Landing Middle School on Thursday, Nov. 17, the railroad giant and state agency served up new posters with updated environmental maps, new cost estimates and new informational charts.

The hundreds of local residents who streamed into the school's gym during the evening to view the new information largely took it with a grain of salt.

"There's no accountability behind any of these slides. There's no transparency for any of the numbers on these slides," said Howard Johnson, president of the Greater Elkridge Community Association and a leading critic of the proposed Elkridge intermodal site, one of four being considered for the facility.

"They're putting up a straw man," Johnson said.

Spokesmen with both CSX and MDOT have defended the facility as a boon to Maryland's economy, and have emphasized that they are moving through the proper steps — including the National Environmental Policy Act process — to ensure community input is heard and environmental and other local considerations are made.

The facility will allow CSX to increase the efficiency of its East Coast operations by double-stacking shipping containers on trains, something CSX can't do currently out of Seagirt Marine Terminal in Dundalk because the double-stacked trains can't fit through the Howard Street Tunnel.

Retrofitting the tunnel would cost between \$1 and \$6 billion dollars, according to the MDOT website, while recent estimates put the cost of building an intermodal between \$140 million and \$325 million. The Elkridge site is at the low end of that cost scale.

For residents at the meeting, however, the cost of the project wasn't high on their list of things to consider.

As was the case at the last Elkridge meeting on the issue in April, the response to the intermodal proposal from residents was sharply critical, highly skeptical and pervaded by a fear that the facility would undercut the financial and environmental viability of nearby neighborhoods.

The fact that the new information showed building the facility on the proposed Elkridge site would be significantly less expensive than building it at any of the other sites — in Jessup, Montevideo and Beltsville — as well as environmental maps that show the Elkridge site overlaps the least with flood plains and wetlands, certainly didn't help their mood, they said.

"We feel like we're between a rock and a hard place," said Cecilia Wilkinson, who has lived just across the railroad tracks from the proposed intermodal site in Elkridge since 1997.

With their kids in high school, she and her husband had considered moving soon. But with the threat of the intermodal being built a stone's throw away — bringing noise and light all hours of the night, she said — they don't have much hope of selling anymore.

"I'm beside myself," Wilkinson said. "Even if we wanted to sell our house and get out now, we couldn't do it."

Added Ed Colbert, a Hanover resident: "No one wants that right now, because (the values in the neighborhood) are already low."

School site questioned

The major concern of residents with younger children seemed to be the Board of Education's decision to build a middle school on a nearby site off Coca-Cola Drive, even after a similar plan for an elementary school there was scrapped because of the site's close proximity to the intermodal site.

"I think it's a terrible decision," said Leslie Cornreich, who has lived on nearby Adcock Lane for the last seven years and whose daughter, Ellie, is in the fourth grade at Elkridge Elementary.

Cornreich, who ran for a spot on the education board last year, said ground level diesel fuel and exhaust from hundreds of trucks that will be passing by the school on their way to and from the intermodal facility is a significant health risk that school officials haven't considered or don't understand. And that's not considering the more physical threat of the trucks themselves, she said.

From the time officials scrapped the elementary school plans and approved the middle school plans, Cornreich said, the risks remain the same.

"Nothing changed in between. Not a thing," she said, noting expediency is needed in finding a school site but blaming county and school officials for mismanaging their time.

"They are spending all this energy, all this time on pushing this school on us instead of spending it looking for somewhere else," she said.

Meg Ricks, whose daughter, Jaid, is in the second grade at Elkridge Elementary, said she was also confused by the board's decision.

"I wasn't surprised when they took the elementary school away because it seemed like an obvious danger thing, but I was surprised when they said, 'OK, this is where the middle school will go,'" Ricks said.

Ricks said the site "could be worse" as a middle school because middle schoolers walk home from school often, and are allowed to be home alone unsupervised.

Officials weigh in

A few elected officials also attended the meeting, including Sen. Ed Kasemeyer and Del. Steve DeBoy, who have both criticized the proposed Elkridge site in the past.

Kasemeyer said while he believes Maryland needs the intermodal facility, he has concerns that the impact on residents hasn't been given due consideration.

"It's almost as if you're fighting something or dealing with something you can't get your hands on," he said, noting residents have little recourse to affect the process.

"How do you value a community?" he said. "What price tag do you put on that?"

Also in attendance was David Nitkin, an aide to County Executive Ken Ulman, who also has expressed concerns about the proposed Elkridge site in the past.

Nitkin said Ulman is still concerned, and that addressing community concerns around the Elkridge site will be a "high hurdle" for CSX and MDOT.

Ulman is "continuing to process all the data that's being presented," Nitkin said, and is looking forward to what the NEPA process brings out.

"He respects it, he has faith in it, and he wants to see it play out," Nitkin said.

"In the end, he'll do what's best for the residents of Elkridge and all the citizens of Howard County," Nitkin said.